

Marx's liberalism?, continued from page 1

ger be an identifiable group. Seen from the point of view of the 20th century, with the Nazi and Stalinist persecutions of the Jews, this is very embarrassing. Indeed, many have denounced Marx as an anti-Semite and a proto-Nazi. One of the things I argue in the book is that this is a false perspective on the essay. What we actually see here is Marx making a very interesting distinction between what he calls "political emancipation" and "human emancipation." He argues that the emancipation of the Jews would involve granting them equal rights with Christians and the creation of a society like in the United States with a separation between church and state, which marked a crucial step in the completion of the program of the French Revolution.

Now if Marx had stopped there, no one could have accused him of being an anti-Semite. But Marx believed that the completion of the program of the French Revolution (the creation of a democratic republic, a society in which people were equal under the law, an end to discrimination on the basis of religion or race), while a historic step forward from the old regime society of orders, itself created a society marked by alienation and capitalist exploitation. So, in the second part of the essay on the Jewish Question, the part which tends to offend people, he went on to argue that true human emancipation requires an end to this capitalist society of alienation, exploitation, and the separation of state and society. This is the beginning of his Hegelian argument for the creation of a communist regime. It seems in some ways an odd argument. Marx was saying that Jews needed to be emancipated in order to act freely as members of civil society, but that when they do that, the moneyed among them will simply end up as capitalist exploiters. So the question becomes: Why would you bother doing this in the first place?

What Marx was talking about is. And this becomes a central element of his political aspirations, a dilemma he would wrestle with for the subsequent 40 years: How would it be possible to do *both*, to complete the tasks of the French Revolution by overthrowing monarchies and creating democratic republics and societies of equal citizens, but to also go beyond that by creating a communist society in which alienation was abolished, and society, the state, and individuals were harmonized? Trying to carry out these two revolutionary acts at once turned out to be impossible. Marx never found a way to resolve this issue.

SL: One major theme of *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life* is that, as you have indicated earlier, Marx understood himself as heir to the French Revolution. Specifically, Marx expected and, indeed, in perhaps the most famous passages of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, described 19th century revolution as a repetition of the 18th century French Revolution, particularly in its 1789–1794 phase. Thus, Marx simultaneously longs for the revolutionary poetry of the future even as he argues that the past necessarily recurs. You describe Marx's thinking at the time of the Revolution of 1848–49 as follows:

Using his influential position within the newly re-organized Communist League... Marx took scant time to join the revolutionary fray. For a little over a year, from the spring of 1848 through the spring of 1849, Marx was, for the first and last time in his life, an insurgent revolutionary: editing in brash, subversive style the New RhineLand News, becoming a leader of the radical democrats of the city of Cologne and of the Prussian Rhineland; trying to organize the working class in Cologne and across Germany; and repeatedly encouraging and fomenting revolution. In all of these activities, Marx persistently promoted the revolutionary strategy he had first envisioned in his essay on the Jewish Question, and would present in scintillating language in the Communist Manifesto. He pressed for a democratic revolution to destroy the authoritarian Prussian monarchy. At the same time he aspired to organize the working class to carry out a communist uprising against a capitalist regime he expected such a democratic revolution to establish. In effect, Marx was proposing a double recurrence of the French Revolution: A repetition of its 1789–1794 phase in mid-nineteenth century Prussia, and also a workers' seizure of power... [195]

And, again, when you come to address the Manifesto itself, you note the magnetic influence of the French Revolution upon its programmatic aspect. "The ten-point program in the Manifesto," you write, "was designed for a revolutionary government, one modeled on the radical, Jacobin phase of the French Revolution in 1789" [210]. How and why does Marx, who is, after all, the great theorist of modernity's historical dynamism, also view history as subject to this sort of repetition such that he expects the French Revolutionary past to return under changed conditions?

JS: Maybe we need to revise our notions about Marx's attitude toward modernity's historical dynamism. Marx's political thought—like that of most of his contemporaries—was centered on the French Revolution. This was just a reality that dominated the first two-thirds of 19th century Europe. When people thought about politics, they thought about it in terms of the French Revolution. Marx was no exception in that respect. What's interesting about Marx is this idea of what I like to call the "double recurrence" of the French Revolution. On the one hand, the French Revolution would literally recur in Central and Eastern Europe, with an uprising against the Prussian and Austrian monarchies and their replacement by a revolutionary German Republic. This would probably include a revolutionary war against the Tsar—a literal rerun of 1793 in mid-19th-century Germany. But there would also be a recurrence by analogy. That is, Marx saw the bourgeoisie as seizing power, bringing the feudal society of orders to an end, and replacing it with a capitalist economy. By analogy, the workers would do the same thing. They would overthrow capitalism and create a communist society. Marx wants to do both at once in 1848, but he finds it very difficult. He discovers, in trying to overthrow the Prussian monarchy, that you can't get the workers lined up against the bourgeoisie, because the bourgeoisie

then won't support you in overthrowing the monarchy. In his speech to the Cologne Democratic Society in August 1848, he ends up describing the class struggle as nonsense. The problem was that organizing the workers against the capitalists did not necessarily mean opposing the Prussian state.

SL: What I meant by Marx as a thinker of historical dynamism is the way that Marx thinks about industrialization as producing constant historical change. It is in this respect that the 19th century looks different from the 18th century, the century of the French Revolution. In this sense Marx is quite conscious of holding on to the French Revolutionary conception of politics under vastly changed circumstances.

JS: I really think that Marx here is a primarily backwards-looking figure, who is reading capitalism's future out of its past. He sees the future political crisis of capitalism being resolved by a movement along the lines of the French Revolution. His whole economic vision of the future of capitalism (e.g., the labor theory of value, the falling rate of profit) is based upon the ideas of David Ricardo, who wrote in the early 19th century, the earliest phase of the Industrial Revolution. Marx saw these conditions, which by the mid-1800s were capitalism's past, as being capitalism's future. All of Marx's invocations of dynamism and constant change—we all know the famous (and actually mistranslated) section of the *Communist Manifesto* proclaiming that "all that is solid melts into air"—tend to end up parsed in terms of Marx's past.

SS: Could you provide your translation of "all that is solid melts into air"?

JS: The German original is "Alles Ständische und Stenhende verdampt." "Stehende" and "Ständische" both come from the verb "to stand," and is used here as sort of a pun—it refers to both "that which exists" and the society of orders, the old regime world that still existed in Prussia and Austria. "Verdampt" means to "evaporate," to "go up in smoke." What Marx was suggesting here is that the power of capitalism—capitalist steam engines ("Dampf" means "steam" in German)—would "evaporate" the society of orders. This would also bring to an end the intellectual world that went along with it: Romanticism, the glorification of the Middle Ages, and religion. Marx's comment at the end about "man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life" is about an age of realism, e.g., literary realism. One of Marx's friends when he was in exile in Paris was Heinrich Heine, the great early German realist.

Mine is a very different take on the passage. The way it has been interpreted in the 20th century is that capitalism produces many new consumer demands; we have a world which is constantly changing in communications,

a watershed moment? How did Marx and Engels relate to post-1848 nationalisms—particularly Polish and Irish (we'll get to Marx's brand of German nationalism later)—and how did this shape their political outlook?

JS: The early advocates of nationalism in the first half of the 19th century tended to envisage antagonisms and military conflicts between different countries as the result of the lusts of monarchs for conquest, glory, and expansion of their domains. They imagined that when states were ruled by nations, by peoples, all of this would come to an end, and nations would spontaneously cooperate with each other. These were the ideas of Giuseppe Mazzini, the leading democrat in 1830s and '40s Europe, whose organizations Young Italy and Young Europe were designed to be an alliance of different nationalist groups against the existing monarchical order. The Brussels Democratic Association had an absolutely fabulous name: The Democratic Association Having as its Goal the Union and Fraternity of all Peoples. This expresses exactly what nationalist thought. But in 1848, the old regimes are swept away, bringing nationalist governments in power and the first thing that happens as a result is that all these different nationalisms go to war with each other. This is especially the case in the Austrian Empire, with the Germans, the Slavs, the Hungarians, and the Italians all at war with each other. This also happens to some extent in Prussia with the Germans and the Poles, and in the far north of Germany between Germans and Danes. That is, it then became clear that nationalist movements were profoundly antagonistic to one another and that nationalism was a militaristic, bellicose ideology. This was a great disappointment and left many nationalists frustrated.

Marx and Engels developed an instrumental relationship to nationalism. For instance, Marx was a fan of Polish nationalism because it was violently anti-Russian, and he saw the destruction of the Tsarist Empire as a central revolutionary step. Marx's daughter Jenny, who followed in her father's political footsteps and became a left-wing journalist in her own right, wrote mostly about her support for Irish nationalism, not communism or the labor movement. Marx and Engels ended up supporting Irish nationalism, because they thought it might ultimately destroy the position of the landowning Anglo-Irish aristocracy, and this, they thought, would be a blow to English capitalism and capitalism worldwide. There were lots of other nationalisms that they didn't like, like that of the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe—which tended to be anti-German and pro-Russian. Engels states in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* in Germany, which is a sort of post-mortem of the revolutions of 1848, that if we have a revolution in Germany and the Czechs are opposed to it, we'll just kill all of them—frankly genocidal rhetoric. We see here the way that these disillusioned nationalities will not in fact spontaneously fraternize, and so it is necessary to view nationalism through its usefulness for revolutionary goals.

The Prussian officials got angry because Marx was quite good at it. And in the western provinces, the Prussians were widely despised.

The other thing that Marx wanted to do was to organize the workers and to form a nationwide German workers' association that would prepare for a new revolutionary struggle against the capitalists once this democratic republic was achieved. The first "Jacobin" part worked pretty well, but the workers' association did not. Marx's working-class, communist followers were disappointing. They spent a lot of time drinking in the cafes and playing dominoes, rather than trying to organize their fellow workers. In Cologne itself, Gottschalk headed a very large workers' association—something like every one in three adult males in the city belonged to it—but to be honest it would be fair to describe him and his mentor Moses Hess in contemporary terminology as "airheads"—fabulists who believed that everybody was in favor of communism, and all you had to do was wait a little while in order for communism to emerge on its own. Gottschalk was notorious for refusing to take part in political campaigns. He sabotaged the elections to the German National Assembly by calling the democrats bourgeois frauds and calling on workers not to vote, thereby allowing the Cologne conservatives to dominate the election. He refused to join the republican and anti-Prussian campaigns. He was really screwing everything up, and all the democrats in Cologne were hostile to Gottschalk—Marx was no exception in this respect. When Gottschalk was arrested by the Prussian government in June 1848, Marx and his followers took control of his organization and attempted to use it to support the democrats. But instead the organization itself collapsed, so that Marx found himself, in 1848, pursuing only the Jacobin/democratic half of his political agenda.

In the fall of 1848, a period of revolutionary crises, Marx was busy stirring up efforts to overthrow the Prussian government, and in November these came very close to succeeding. He continued in this vein until the very end of the revolution, until in the spring of 1849 he suddenly changed his mind and began trying to organize the workers again. He broke with the democrats and the movement for German National Unity, and stood aside in the last revolutionary crisis of May 1849. There's this odd back-and-forth pattern, which would be the same with the International Workingmen's Association, within which we see the difficulty Marx had in getting both prongs of his "double recurrence" to work simultaneously.

SS: As the U.S. Civil War reached a revolutionary pitch and Polish nationalists rose in revolt against the czar, Marx came to help form the International Workingmen's Association. Respecting Marx's involvement in the association and its original aims, you write,

Marx's plans for the association appeared in his agenda for the First Congress of the IWMA... The items for action included the advocacy of social reform—a shorter working day, limitations on women and children's labor, the replacement of indirect with direct taxation, an international inquiry into workplace conditions, and the endorsement of producers' cooperatives and trade unions. There were just two expressly political points, both taken from the arsenal of nineteenth century radicalism: the replacement of standing armies with militias; and "the necessity of annihilating the Muscovite influence in Europe... [via] the reconstitution of Poland on a social and democratic basis." [358, ellipsis in original]

Starting from this basis, how did the IWMA politically evolve? What developments did it face and what were the central tensions within it? What were the primary aims Marx sought to advance in his struggles over the direction of the First International? How did these evolve into a struggle with the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin and what was at stake there?

JS: As you can see in the quote, one might think of Marx's objectives in the IWMA as not involving any specifically revolutionary goals. He saw the IWMA primarily in terms of trade union and workplace-related reform movements. Marx believed that these would ultimately be revolutionary in nature because of his theory of surplus value, according to which capitalists gain their profits by taking part of the product that workers have produced. Marx saw unions as trying to seize some of that surplus value back from the capitalists. He hoped that, if the unions continued this effort with the support of the IWMA, it would tend to reduce capitalist profits and lead to a revolutionary crisis. This was a long-term strategy that would take a while to work out. Marx was supported in these ideas by the English trade unionists that formed the backbone of the IWMA and provided it with most of its meager finances.

The opponents of Marx were revolutionary adherents of secret societies, who saw the IWMA as a means by which to overthrow the existing order in Europe. They were interested above all in this idea of a secret society organization. At first, this was less the case for Bakunin than for the followers of the French revolutionary Louis Auguste Blanqui, who spent the 1830s–1870s plotting revolutions, trying them out, going to jail, being released, and plotting new ones.

There were two things that created tensions in the IWMA. One was its spread, from Northern and Western Europe (where it began) to countries in Southern Europe, where there weren't really any trade unions, but where the tradition of secret societies was still very active. The second was the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, which disrupted politics all across the European continent. Marx was actually not at first hostile to Bakunin. The two became friends when they met in exile in France in the late 1840s, and Marx was always very impressed with him. When they met again some 15 years later, Marx wrote to Engels saying that Bakunin was one of the few people who had moved forward in the interval rather than backwards. Bakunin was an enormous fan of secret societies, and became involved with some very dubious ones like that of Sergey Netchayev, who was famously depicted in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. He therefore found himself increasingly in opposition

"Marx's liberalism?" continues on page 4

Aging in the afterlife, continued from page 2

experience, assembly, slogan? How does that become a new kind of political identity? An important development in the iconography of strike debt was borrowing the red square from the Québec students. The red square was taken as an emblem of us all being in the "red," that is, subjugated to debt. It was a uniform symbol that took the form of a wearable piece of felt, so that it was actually very bodily, intimate, tactile, but also irregular and unifying, as it links the bodies of the debtors to others.

We know we are not going to be able to pay off our debts; and we are scared and isolated. What does it mean to embrace that as a common condition, and turn it into a militant refusal of the debt system? The actual gesture of burning the debt symbol becomes a performative ritual on the part of the debtors. Over the summer there were debt burning rituals that were incorporated into the assembly at the one-year anniversary of Occupy.

All the aesthetic, artistic, and symbolic dimensions of strike debt are interwoven with analysis, publishing efforts, actions, and assemblies and that is what is qualitatively new, in terms of the contemporary artistic field. The elaboration of non-expert amateur props, these are aesthetic experiments, which, with the support of the institutional and formalized art world, such as the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, the Creative Time Summit, and artists like Martha Rosler, help secure resources and plug in more people. The point is that these are practices and ideas grounded in the experimental laboratory that is contemporary art.

Gregg Horowitz: It is unclear to me why the concept of the death of art even matters. Does anybody organize their practice, in light of this concept, any longer?

Yates's presentation affirmed that, for me, there is almost nothing going on there, you have a break, an end, but the idea of death has sort of vanished. If the death of art is not all that useful in the self-understanding of contemporary art practice, what about the "art" concept? Let's just suppose, art is dead, and what that means is that we cannot understand our practices in light of that concept. Why is it so hard to give up a concept, the passing of which has been noted in various ways?

Giving up the concept turns out to be hard, and we do not give up the concept by holding on to another concept, which is that of the death of art. That is the way in which we hold on to the concept of art. Although I have written probably too much on the death of art, I find the concept increasingly inscrutable. I know what it means for a cultural practice to cease being meaningful, either because it falls out of the cultural repertoire, as is happening to the practice of striking film prints of movies, which will make a difference in how we experience movies, or because it becomes mere routine, like saying "Have a good day" at the end of a conversation.

If you listen to that set of words these days, they are at a state of involution. It is the sound of routinization of what was a meaningful cultural practice. But that can't be the meaning of art being dead, since art has become practically inescapable in recent years and, while the interpretation and consumption of it can't keep up with the flow of product, the increasing volume of interpretation and consumption indicates that the practice of art has not become merely one of routine.

The near-ubiquity of art and its products in our everyday worlds must be what is behind the peculiar thought expressed in Paul Mason's article that the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of Occupy somehow signal the death of contemporary art. Although the significance of Occupy has yet to play itself out enough for anyone to draw a conclusion about its consequences, one would think that, with its openly political ambitions, what it would represent the end of would be, say, the hegemony of neoliberalism. How one could come to care instead about the impact of Occupy on the gallery system is, on the face of it, risible. But art is not simply ubiquitous. It is like kudzu: where anything grows now, art grows, too, and faster. But this is a sign that art is not a dead practice but rather a fervidly, strappingly healthy one. Such was also the sentiment expressed by the Dadaists when they declared, for instance, "Die Kunst is tot! Es lebe die neue Maschinenkunst Tatlins!" The practice in the name of which art is declared dead, the practice liberated by the death of art, is machine-art. "Art is dead! Long live art!"

Art is unkillable. But what I find most inscrutable about the sentiment is not the superficial thought that art is dead but the underlying thought that art ever was alive. Although Hegel never said that art had died, but rather that it was and remained on the side of its highest destiny a thing of the past, which is a much different thought, he nonetheless revealed that the myth of living works of art was an essential part of the way the practice of art lives on in its post-classical "after-life," in the age, that is, of its self-awareness as a practice with its own, autonomous values and ambitions. It is a mythic fate that art throws on to its past. From this point of view, it becomes thinkable that the supposed life of art is a backward formation that enables art to die again and again, to remain, in other words, perpetually undead, so that post-artistic practices can remain vital in evading the same fate. The death of art is, we might say, a meme of contemporary artistic consciousness in which is distortedly expressed a discontent with the increasing artistic encrustation of the contemporary world. Better: not just as a meme, it is a zombie idea and, since the content of the idea is zombiehood itself, it is a meta-zombie idea whose importance lies not in its truth-value as such but in its special place in zombie self-reflection.

Because zombies have become ubiquitous in the contemporary culture—nearly as ubiquitous as art, but not quite—there is something both cheap and meta- in my recruiting them into the project of making the death of art intelligible, of metabolizing it, and digesting it. But the contemporary zombie figure is actually a pretty good image for the undeadness of art. The zombie was a figure of Vudon magic, a dead person reanimated by witchcraft; scary, but really nothing more than an embodiment of Benjamin's idea that we live in an age when not even the dead are safe. But the contemporary zombie is not just reanimated. It is back

for blood. To the return of the dead we have added undying hunger.

Death is the radical outside of hegemonic systems that pretend to close off all alternatives. As radical outside-ness, death offers the prospect of nothing but hope. But the figure of the zombie undermines even this source of hope, for where death is, there old needs gather and swarm. For us, not even death represents hope.

There is another way to understand the contemporary flesh-eating zombie precisely as a figure of hope. The zombie is embodied need when need's fateful entry into the web of social norms is taken off the table.

There is a new zombie movie called *Warm Bodies* in which apparently zombies can fall in love. The zombie is the figure that embodies our horror at human need, that it may not be adequately mediated by social norms. But one might turn that right around and say that that's precisely what's hopeful about the figure of the zombie, for in it we imagine a moment of hunger utterly outside of social appropriation. The zombie, in this sense, represents the conjunction of social death and undying human need, the conjunction that, for the Marxist left, has been expressed in the thought that the proletariat is simultaneously the inside and outside of capitalism: the conjunction of social death and that dying need. The zombie will not lay down its need in exchange for a bag of food. It wants life, which is the one thing it cannot have. The zombie, in this light, is a figure which both embodies the limit of a social order and the imagination of its recomencement.

And so with art: the undeadness of art rests not on an earlier life, but rather on our need to imagine the outside of what we have now, to hope for it, in the form of what cannot die.

Q&A

What about practices that reference past political movements—what the posters looked like in the Bolshevik Revolution, for example, or the aesthetic of the 1960s New Left? It seems like there are deliberate attempts to reference the past even though, as Yates put it, "we are not [invested in] looking back", and called saw Occupy as a break, as something fundamentally new. But what is the importance in this refusal to look back, especially because we still live in capitalism, and there are no revolutionary politics to speak of right now?

YM: The importance of historical memory and intergenerational dialogue can be overstated and that is clear in *Tidal* and in Occupy. What my generation drew as lessons from the past came from movements like ACT-UP, the Black Panthers, and radical labor struggles. When I say that we must resist looking back, that is really about resisting melancholy, of recognizing where things are now: the occupation in the parks was a crack, a rupture, and created a new kind of space. But now we no longer have the park and it is not a moment that we can ever really recreate. We want to talk about it in terms of the principle of direct action, of living and caring for one another without the mediation of the state, without the mediation of capital, as something that really intervened in the taken-for-grantedness of capitalism, of people being alone and isolated, and generating an opening-up of the imagination of about how to live differently. It is pre-figurative politics. People will say that Occupy changed the conversation, it changed the horizon of inequality, but it is not just about that. Occupy is also about practicing an alternative form of living relative to one another. That is where the resonance comes in. It is also about the actual practice: how you do it.

The point about not looking back is to not be nostalgic for the park, for that moment of everyone being physically present. But it is also about the Left's melancholy for the whole Left. The whole Left is also attached to lost ideals. Its identity is often parasitically dependent on the fact that things don't dramatically change. That's something Occupy really disrupted. Not looking back does not mean, don't be historical, don't remember, but rather, don't be dominated by the past, whether the past of Occupy, or the past of the Left, because the Left tends toward melancholic fixation.

GH: Then the question, "Will art be possible in the absence of the Left?" becomes, I think, really pressing—which itself seems to beg a sort of interesting question, which is not what we mean by art, by the death of art, but what do we mean by the Left? And I want to ask this in a non-melancholic spirit. If nostalgia for the park is already on the horizon—how long ago was this? The fact is that Occupy, which is admirable in all sorts of ways, is not yet a political movement. If a year is a space on which nationalism can perch, then we don't have a politics there. I want to make this point broadly: what it means to say that the Left is attached to melancholy. The problem is not that we lack revolutionary politics. We should be so lucky to lack that. What we lack is *politics*, period. It is that simple. And we don't know how to make sense of the way in which the political spectrum has collapsed around us. This may be a break, this may be something new, naked capitalism, but it is capitalism without a political emphasis. But if there is no contradiction being given form, then the prospect of giving form, that I take many of us care about, is not even on the table. So we are going to get really great posters and banners, but that next development in which there is a kind of outer politics, that still seems to me un-approached. I hope Occupy becomes nostalgia. Let that nostalgia flower at this moment.

In regards to how what appears as new is actually old, how might we understand that dynamic, in light of the domination of capital in a society that repeatedly subsumes the appearance of the new as it flares up? How can we understand this dynamic of old and new in terms of the possibility of political organization or the actual new?

PM: This is the big problem of human history. To paraphrase Marx: the past hangs like a millstone around our necks. People made the French Revolution; they imagined that they were ancient Greeks and Romans. People try to act politically in the 21st century; they think about Lenin and the storming of the Winter

Palace. This is the value in the disappearance of historical memory. In a way, the extinction of the Left of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century brings its own loss, because something can be learned from historical inheritance, but it also clears the way for people to think in new ways. One of the fabulous things about Occupy was the total irrelevance of the past left, of the history of the Left, from its discussions and actions. No one was trying to form a new revolutionary party or argue about reformism verses revolutionary activity.

GH: The issue of how to save Western culture is not about saving what is on the table anymore but about asking what is on the table that might be worth destroying. That is, whether there is any orientation we can derive from it, that will allow us to see our way through the present, to give our politics a structure, to give our politics some normative force, or something like that. There is something very odd about the state of aesthetic discourse right now. Everyone is scrambling for a normative orientation. But I think we should step back for a moment and at least entertain the possibility that we cannot discern that and ask what a normative orientation would mean right now. So, as you say, you can declare art dead right now. Go ahead, do it, I give you permission. The problem is you get nothing from it. The juice in declaring it over has dried up.

YM: Imagine this: suddenly people in Occupy say, "That is beautiful." You see some shit and say, "That is a beautiful action and that is a beautiful banner." It is like militant beauty, militant Left, and it is a new thing. I want to redefine the notion of beauty. I am not scared that the aesthetic is going to fuck up the politics, because the politics are happening, and there is a new space for aesthetics.

AV: Isn't the aestheticization of politics fascism? How is your proposal not the same thing?

YM: Well that was the Benjaminian argument. It totally makes sense with something like *Triumph of the Will*. It is the fact that aesthetics and politics are inseparable. It is not a fascist *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but the fact that there are moments we experience and feel that appear in a modern mode deeply embedded in our project. Benjamin would be the dialectical counterpart. That is the danger, to fall into the aestheticization of politics, in the *old sense*. The new sense of aesthetics and politics is not fascist and awful, but actually, "Oh my god that is a beautiful demonstration." It is fascist to say that?

PM: What people miss about the death of art is that utopian moment: The idea of the merging of art in everyday life, not the fact that art is not with us as an aspect of the disappearance of the Left. It seems to me that the counterpart to that is the treatment of Occupy

Marx's liberalism?, continued from page 3

to Marx. This eventually led to a break between the two, and a struggle for control of the IWMA. As part of this struggle, Marx decided that the IWMA had to endorse the idea of workers' political parties. At the time, very few workers' political parties existed. There were two competing ones in Germany at the time, but Marx trusted neither entirely. This led to a ferocious struggle between Marx and his followers, and frankly every other element in the IWMA. In the 1872 Hague conference, Marx's followers were victorious and they expelled Bakunin. They then moved the headquarters of the IWMA to New York, basically with the intention of destroying the organization; Marx realized that plans for revolution probably had to be shelved after the repression of the Paris Commune. Just as Marx took control of the organization, he chose to bring it to an end.

SL: Why was Marx concerned to maintain the IWMA as an open, democratic political activity? A quarter century before, Marx and Engels had fought to publicize the activities of the Communist League, though it is true that, after the reverses of 1849, the Communist League took on a secret, underground form. Still, is it fair to say that the struggles in the IWMA repeat his struggles in 1847 for an open form of politics and publicization?

JS: I think so. The Communist League did adopt a clandestine form after 1849, but that's because open political activity was essentially impossible in an age of revolutionary repression. Marx was always a proponent of open politics. He was a newspaper editor—this was always one of his chief forms of political activism. Marx was suspicious of secret societies and believed wholeheartedly in open politics. One of the ironies of his struggles against Bakunin was that Marx was convinced Bakunin was trying to undermine the IWMA by smuggling in his followers in order to form a secret society within the IWMA itself. This was actually not the case, and it was ironically one of Marx's allies who was proposing this idea, the veteran German revolutionary Johann Philipp Becker. Marx flew off the handle at Becker's suggestions, and thought he was being manipulated by Bakunin.

SS: Two of Marx and Engels's key associates in the German workers movement were Ferdinand Lassalle and Wilhelm Liebknecht. Eventually, it was Liebknecht, who opposed Lassalle's coziness with Bismarck, who came to enjoy Marx and Engels's support. One crucial division between the two, and what eventually divided Lassalle from Marx as well, was again the question of nationalism. As veterans of 1848, they all supported in some sense the cause of Germany, but Marx articulated this as an anti-Prussian demand for a German republic. Yet, in the face of eventual German unification enforced by Prussia, Marx and Liebknecht were forced to make something of it. This meant coming to some sort of terms with the followers of Lassalle. What were the fundamental underlying tensions expressed by Liebknecht's opposition to the Lassalleans and to what extent were these overcome?

JS: There were three issues here. One was the question of the nature of a united German nation-state.

as an aesthetic event, as a piece of performance art. It is a very striking idea. But not an accurate one. The American version is more prone to branding and aestheticization. But if you put Occupy into the international context, it seems to be part of a much larger social movement, like in Greece, which is in fact too large and too political to be contained by these aesthetic categories. But the fact that it so quickly turned into an aestheticized object is a sign of the present day weakness of the politics. This seems to be a call to deepen the political aspects of it.

GH: We are in a moment when our political weakness is being tested all over. But so too is the strength therefore of a kind of quasi-autonomous aestheticizing mechanism. Stuff gets turned into spectacle, it is not a deliberate tactic on anybody's part because they are not apparently politicized. It just becomes spectacular so immediately. Tom Finkelpearl, the director of the Queens Museum, who works with all sorts of social practice art, asked me a question I never thought of asking myself, "Why does everyone want to know, is it art? Why does that question matter?" But it does matter; it's kind of a driving question. It brought to mind a perspective of one of the originators of social practice art, Gordon Matta-Clark, although he did not have the concept for it at the time. Now I hate going to galleries because I am afraid I am going to be fed the art. I feel I am in some bizarre version of degenerative politics: here is the stuff itself, eat it. And the concept oddly becomes so robust, that it is almost hard to think about social practice without thinking about art, or political practice. **IP**

Transcribed by Chris Mansour and Bret Schneider

- Paul Mason. "Does Occupy Signal the Death of Contemporary Art?" BBC News, 30 April 2012, available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17872666>.
- Hito Steyerl. "The New Flesh: Material Afterlives of Images," available online at <http://www.kraccar-lectures.de/en/summer-2013/hito-steyerl/>.
- Mason, "Occupy."
- Plato, *Republic*, trans. C.V.C Reeves (New York: Hackett, 2004), §398b.
- Anonymous, *Tidal Occupy Theory*, February 2012, 15. The issue is available online at http://tidalmap.org/pdf/fda4_block-by-block.pdf.



The final issue of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*

artistic trends, etc. That's a 20th century reinterpretation of Marx's ideas.

SS: One of "Marx's least successful predictions" from the *Communist Manifesto*, you note, is that of the imminent end of nations and nationalism: "National distinctiveness and conflicts between nations disappear more and more with the development of the bourgeoisie, with free trade, the world market, the uniformity of industrial production and the relations of life corresponding to them." As you note, the resurgence of nationalism in pre-1914 Europe belies any straightforward affirmation of what Marx wrote. But as you also note, Marx's view nevertheless contained an element of truth rooted in Marx's own experience. Marx had participated with the London Fraternal Democrats and the Brussels Democratic Association, both of which "were based on the cooperation of radicals of different nationalities" [207] and, of course, Marx, whose own perspective was resolutely internationalist, went on to participate in other organizations dedicated to international cooperation. Given this, might we not take Marx's observation in the *Communist Manifesto* as indicating, if not straightforward dissolution of nationalism, then its substantial, if subtle, transformation from British patriotism or later French revolutionary nationalism of the 18th century? In the history of European nationalism, how does the revolution of 1848 serve as

Aging in the afterlife

The many deaths of art

Anton Vidokle, Gregg Horowitz, Paul Mattick, and Yates McKee

Last spring, in response to Paul Mason’s article “Does Occupy Signal the Death of Contemporary Art?,” the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted an event on the “death of art.” Speakers included Julieta Aranda who was represented by Anton Vidokle, Gregg Horowitz, Paul Mattick, and Yates McKee. The discussion was moderated by Chris Mansour and was held at the New School in New York on February 23, 2013. Complete video of the event can be found online at <http://media.platypus1917.org/aging-in-the-afterlife-the-many-deaths-of-art/>. What follows is an edited transcript of the conversation.

Anton Vidokle: These are Julieta Aranda’s opening remarks: It was with a strange sense of déjà vu that I accepted the invitation to attend yet another funeral for art. Of course I have heard about all the previous ones, but this is the first time I have been invited to attend one. As an artist it is hard to understand the compulsion to establish our sense of art history through the recurrent announcements of “the death or art.” Art seems to be constantly dying, but we never talk much about its birth. It must have been stubbornly reborn on countless occasions, since we are here again, trying to measure its vital signs. I tried to do a bit of a research into the many deaths of art—but I was quickly overwhelmed: In one way or another, we have been trying to put art in a coffin and nail it shut for the past 2,000 years.

In the 1980s—during the art market boom—there were plenty of death calls: the death of painting, the death of modernism, and also the death of postmodernism. Meanwhile, the New York art market was very much alive, fueled by the usual suspects: speculators, investors, real estate developers, social climbers, and so forth. Of course as with everything that is artificially inflated, there was an eventual market crash, and this crash had many casualties. Many galleries disappeared, and many artists’ careers dried out. But this wasn’t understood to be the death of art as it had been previously announced.

I am skeptical about the *Peter and the Wolf* announcements of an imminent death of art—this time in its “contemporary” incarnation. For me, it is more interesting to question the favorable disposition—almost a wish—that we have towards the demise of art. The death sentence on contemporary art comes not only because the current operative model for contemporary art is deficient. (Under the current model, meaning is often quickly emptied out from objects and images, and market artists are a renewable resource.) But this wish also comes partly because we want a new big thing, we want the new thing to come now, and we want to be the new thing while the market is booming. As Hito Steyerl, a German video artist and writer, points out in her Kracauer Lecture, “The New Flesh: Material Afterlives of Images,” “To declare something over or dead is a form of production, that purposefully kills off something in order to launch new commodities or attract attention.”²

To assume a one-to-one equivalence between contemporary art and the art-market for contemporary art—so that we can pass a summary judgment and quickly condemn it to death as an evil that needs to be eradicated—would be like holding a perfunctory trial, the outcome of which we know in advance.

What happens, in this case, to artistic practices that have no market value? And, what happens to art that is currently produced in situations where there is no market? Is this art not contemporary? Is this art also dying?

If we choose to talk about the art of the past 50 years only in the ways in which it has been coded by capital, we may be simplifying the body we are trying to find, and giving it an outline we can reject. Paul Mason’s recent article for the BBC refers exclusively to a contemporary art that is full of obscenely rich “concept artists,” whose work is executed by “minions.” And, subsequently, that artists involved in Occupy are pitted against a world described as “the white-walled gallery: with its air of non-committal, its preference for meaningless gesture, its reliance on interpretation by the viewer, and its extreme focus on commercialization.”³

The problem is that, if we accept the above definition of contemporary art’s body, we are (again) defining this body; we are ready to bury it as that of a white male. In the interest of the art that I care for, I feel compelled to challenge that definition. While the structure of the gallery system is indeed troublesome, to use it as a synonym for all of the contemporary artistic practices outside of the work of the artists affiliated with Occupy would be a gross misrepresentation; more so, it would be one that persists in depicting the West, and specifically New York, as the center of the world. While this is true for New Yorkers, it is not necessarily true for everybody else.

We could go ahead and declare that contemporary art, as we know it, is dead or dying, and replace it with the next new black: today, Occupy; tomorrow, something else. But to be ready to broadly dismiss contemporary art in a summary gesture, replacing it entirely with a “new” understanding of art that is advocating an obligatory commitment to explicit leftist political ideologies and a sense of social purpose, doesn’t actually sound so new to me. Hasn’t this conversation been going on continuously since the 1920s?

In fact, it makes me think of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and of Cambodia’s Year Zero, or of Plato’s position towards poets in the *Republic*:

But, for our own good, we ourselves should employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving

poet and story-teller, one who would imitate the speech of a more decent person and who would tell his stories in accordance with the patterns we laid down when we first undertook the education of our soldiers.⁴

Good intentions aside: isn’t this model slightly prescriptive?

As far as meaning in contemporary art goes, when I see the work of artists like Walid Raad or Jimmie Durham or Katerina Seda, what I see is the ways in which they successfully smuggle into the dominant narrative of histories and images what would otherwise not be accessible. I do not consider their practice less meaningful just because they enjoy a considerable degree of success, and I certainly appreciate the histories and images that they smuggle in that retain all of their original political complexity and their uncomfortable qualities, without being flattened or prepackaged into ready-to-eat morsels.

It is extremely problematic that there is a financial apparatus currently rigged around contemporary art—since it may be the biggest instance of an art market that has ever been in operation. On top of this, the concomitant professionalization of the art system, which aims at feeding this market through a proliferation of expensive art schools and training programs put in place to train domesticable and reliable artists that can produce viable commodities, only adds fuels to the fire.

However, it is possible to understand to a certain degree the willingness of certain artists, but not all, to enter this problematic situation. It has been tacitly agreed that artists shouldn’t concern themselves with money. And while the idea of making a living from art is interpreted as being morally corrupt, there is no alternative system in operation to guarantee the welfare of artists. Artists who “sell out” are bad. But if they refuse to do that, then what happens to them? How are they supposed to make a living? It has always been unclear to me how are artists supposed to take care of mundane needs such as paying rent, going to the dentist, having dinner, and taking a child to the doctor.

The current conditions of production of art are dire. There has been a shrinking of unpredictable spaces, an erosion of relationships that are not professional, and a disappearance of a bohemian and non-domesticated world. This may be a temporary condition, only applicable “while the market lasts”, but it is a damaging condition nonetheless, a condition that could render the soul homeless.

As I look at the shape-shifting body of art on its contemporary inception—a body that doesn’t seem to fit its coffin or even its own definition—it has become clear to me that contemporary art may not be as simple as the single thread constructed that we try to collect as a digestible unit. Art produced today has many paradigms, some of them depleted, others full of potential. Art will transform, as it always has historically, and become something other than contemporary; an art that we don’t know yet—and which we will only know when it has arrived. Instead of a coffin, with all of its irreversible solemnity, it may be better to make sure that there are fertile conditions in place for the new art to come.

The patient will live! Let’s build a better world for her.

Paul Mattick: I will begin with Paul Mason’s suggestion that “Occupy signaled the death of contemporary art.” Since Occupy’s wonderful but short life has been over for some time, while contemporary art is rolling on, with its full panoply of artists, dealers, writers, auctions, museums, and collectors, the obvious response to this is, “No.” Mason’s own article confirms this, as it focuses on an Occupy activist turning, once the movement has been dispersed, to market her agitprop effort as contemporary art. On the other hand, one should beware of the obvious answer, and I will take another look at this question at the end.

It will be useful to define the chief term under discussion, or at least give my definition, so that we can know if and when we are talking about the same thing. “Art,” since it evolved in Europe in the late 18th century, has been the name for a social practice of valuing—and of collecting, making, attending to, and displaying—objects and performances capable of signifying the discernment of those who appreciate them. In a smaller mouthful, art gives body to taste and so makes it visible. The exercise of taste for artworks, like the exercise of choice, attests to the chooser’s freedom from necessity, or at least to a willingness to disregard it. “Necessity,” in the commercial culture that came into existence with modern society, means above all a concern with money—making it and spending it. Art developed its enormous importance within capitalism, the first culture in history to be dominated by the use of money, because it provides a social space for demonstrating freedom from commercial necessity. Art, the opposite of wage labor and capitalist entrepreneurship alike, is work done for love, not money; its collection and enjoyment signify a spiritual set of interests, raising the art-lover above the material concerns of “everyday life.” It is this that makes art so valuable and expensive.

Thus, in the 19th century, art allowed the newly ascendant bourgeoisie to claim the mantle of social superiority formerly worn by the landed aristocracy for whom paintings, architecture, music, dance, etc. had been not art but part of the paraphernalia of daily life. In the 20th century, “modern” art spoke for the claims of bourgeois society to have established values of its own, with, for instance, the motorcar sometimes supplementing and sometimes re-embodiment the classic grace of the Parthenon.

The ascendancy of the United States, a self-made country without a feudal past, after World War II produced a new twist in the modernist version of art. While a turn-of-the-century magnate like J.P. Morgan still looked to Europe for the artworks required to show that America had arrived, post-war art-lovers, and indeed the American government itself, found the highest stage of artistic development in the new American art. This bourgeoisie, an American one, lacked the bad conscience of its forebears; now the most avant-garde art—originally produced to mark the distance between the artist and the bourgeois—became the official art of business society.

At various points in this long trajectory, the idea has arisen that art could come to an end. In the early 1800s, famously, when art was just beginning, Hegel believed art would, like religion, cede its cultural significance to philosophy; alas, I speak from the perspective of a professional philosopher: Philosophy has turned out to be of negligible cultural significance compared to art. The radical upheavals following World War I gave rise to various forms of the idea that the revolutionary transformation of daily life might lead to the absorption of art, in the form of industrial design, into life. Such ideas were encouraged by the habit of looking at art as pursuing an autonomous, unified history, with one “school” succeeded another “school”: a history directed, following the Hegelian model, towards the realization of a goal can be imagined to reach some sort of end when the goal is attained.



The success of “advanced” art in the post-war period gave rise to the related idea of the “death of the avant-garde.” An idea with much truth to it, since after 1960 the avant-garde system, with critics and other cultural intermediaries alerting maverick collectors to the masterpieces of the future, did in fact break down. The critics almost uniformly hated Pop art, but collectors bought it anyway, and soon the critics had to like it. With avant-gardism’s demise, the pluralism of the art world gradually became unmistakable, though attempts were made to hold it at bay by defining new avant-gardes, especially by academic writers and art historians like the members of the *October* circle. But, whatever the success of this attempt in academia, the art world saw the death of the critic, as control over taste was exercised by curators, auctioneers, and collectors themselves.

This process cannot be fully understood without reference to the development of capitalism itself in the same period. The crisis of the mid-1970s announced the end of the great post-war economic boom. Henceforth capitalism’s dynamism shifted increasingly away from productive investment towards financial speculation. We all know the results: the globalization of capital, on the one hand, and growing inequality in the distribution of wealth, on the other. With a new international elite concentrating a hitherto unknown share of the world’s wealth in its hands, art—museum and gallery art, at any rate (the situation is rather different for art music)—became basically a possession of the global one percent, albeit a luxury good whose value still requires general visibility and appreciation.

What might be said above all to have met its death as this state of affairs developed is the role of educated people, whom Pierre Bourdieu called “the dominated fraction of the dominating class,” as the arbiters of cultural value. This is part of a general devaluation of the thing once celebrated as “culture,” manifested in such phenomena as the decline of liberal arts education and growing un- and under-employment of the educated, now condemned by the new terms of a credit-enabled capitalism to lifelong debt peonage. This has had effects directly for artists, and one of the interesting things, which was mentioned in Aranda’s comments, is the material disappearance of bohemian life: cheap rent, affordable studios, and so forth.

Occupy was above all the protest of this social fraction: the devalued educated. As such it was, as a friend observed to me, a symptom of the same condition which has given rise to talk of the death of art: the end of art as a cultural possession of the educated middle class. This neither means that art is over, as the social practice that has been with us for the last three centuries, nor that people will stop making things and performances for a wide variety of purposes, inside and outside the art world proper. It does mean that the conditions of art making and appreciation have altered in important ways that it would be well worth taking some time to try to understand.

Yates McKee: Since there’s a tone of morbidity and death and loss in the air, I wanted to read from *Tidal 4*, a piece called “On Love, Loss, and Movement”:

We came to the park in mourning.
We had lost so much. We turned mourning
into militancy and felt awakened. We

discovered that all was not past, that there was a present in which we might live. We cracked history open, and time seemed full. Everything was happening in the Now.

Then came the eviction, and we were dispersed. In the aftermath of the park, we mourn what was lost. We know that we can never fully separate from it. It is inside us, it haunts us, it speaks to us. We are bound by it. But it does not tie us down to the past. The beloved whispers: “you must learn to live. Now.”

This means letting go of that perfect future where all the wrongs will be right. That future will always be postponed, not yet open, unavailable--and thus an object of melancholic sadness in advance. We do not wait and lament.

The storms of Wall Street are unrelenting. It is what they call progress. There is no shelter, no park, where we can ride this out. We have to learn to live in the open. There comes a moment when we know that we can’t go on. But we go on. It’s easy to break up. To continue with love is hard. Don’t be afraid. Don’t look back.⁵

I do think there is a crisis surrounding the death and definition of contemporary art and its identity. I am intrigued by this question of ends, deaths, and finalities, but it does seem to risk making that into a grand tradition—the negative dialectic of death and rebirth. On the one hand, we want to avoid any apocalyptic declarations, since we know that is naïve. On the other hand, it should still be possible to try to describe and account for a break. Recently in the U.S., Occupy opened up space to rethink the nature of cultural practice, of the relationship between art and politics, in ways that were anticipated by the most exciting currents in contemporary art. At the moment, some of the taken-for-granted protocols of contemporary art have fallen apart, but that doesn’t mean there is no more art.

Here is a little dialectic image: “the people’s library” at Zucotti Park in October of 2011. The librarian created an arts and culture section, where you could read a copy of *October* magazine devoted to “the contemporary” from 2010. On the right is a copy of the *Occupy Wall St Journal* that is being displayed on the wall at MoMA, with the special poster edition, with designs by Josh MacPhee, Paul Chan, and other contemporary artists. What does it mean for the history of the avant-garde to pop up in an avant-garde political practice, and vice versa, what does it mean for cultural products of that movement to end up back in MoMA—even after MoMA had been a site of struggle for Occupy with the struggle and lockout of the Sotheby’s workers?

Much of Occupy was anticipated, consciously and unconsciously, in a lot of the most interesting contemporary art of the past ten years: Thomas Hirschhorn, Sharon Hayes, and the whole field of social practices. It is not as if Occupy came about as a movement and then artists came along and got involved. In fact, artists were deeply involved from the very beginning of Occupy in August, 2011, and their involvement has to do with opening a space of imagination, something absent from the Left in the US for a long time.

The magazine *Tidal* provided the impetus for post-May Day organization. A series of assemblies emerged that started discussing the possibility of making debt the focus of our political movement. Like Occupy, people having conversations in public space, with the crucial feature that people psychologically and emotionally were able to “come out” and to have a testimonial experience. This was a groundbreaking moment in getting “strike debt” in motion. Student debt was a key focus, but we also addressed the housing and mortgage crisis, which were central to the concerns of Occupy.

Tidal is also an example of a practice that artists started in which the visual, aesthetic, and graphic elements are really crucial. But it doesn’t define itself in terms of art. It takes advantage of artistic platforms, cultivates an ongoing dialogue with the art world, and mobilizes its resources. It is not like art is dead, and now we have a new avant-garde with Occupy, but it is a spectrum. It was a tactical choice to engage with art, which can be very critical and productive, and breaks us out of a frame when it becomes one of the primary platforms for the intellectual discourse of the movement.

How do we visualize something as abstract as debt, as something that is embodied and very immediate? How do debtors respond to one another in an image,